Research

Inventing the ‘vernacular’:
Cases in South African crafts

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Abstract

This article investigates the notion of the ‘contemporary vernacular’ in the visual arts and how this is invented or developed in response to certain national imperatives, as delineated in Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983), Fine (2004) and Bowe (1993). It then examines the socio-political factors that give rise to the need for the invention of the ‘contemporary vernacular’ and the characteristics of such ‘vernacular’ arts, and clarifies this theoretical explanation briefly in relation to two historical examples, viz. the Russian matryoshka doll and the products of Morris & Co., the Victorian craft company belonging to William Morris. It then examines three examples of contemporary South African crafts, namely Ardmore Ceramic Art, Kaross embroideries and the Mapula project. The works produced by these initiatives show stylistic characteristics that reveal a developing South African ‘contemporary vernacular’ and, furthermore, in their modes of production, correlate with the social, political and economic characteristics of ‘vernacular’ arts in a number of countries.

Introduction

Any socio-political change in a country will generally give rise to a perceived need for a local, national or regional approach to culture, manifesting in many cultural forms but often in the visual arts (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Bowe 1993; Lippard 1999). The term used relatively recently for such developments, for example by many of the authors in Bowe (1993), by Lippard (1999) and Fine (2004), is ‘vernacular’, as in ‘vernacular expression’ and ‘vernacular arts’. The term ‘vernacular’ is relatively well established with reference to architecture or language, but has fallen into disuse in developing countries such as South Africa, as it is politically and culturally loaded and carries certain negative connotations. The term is less common in art historical discourse, as in ‘vernacular arts’, and is even contested. This may be, in a South African context, because ‘vernacular’ can refer to ‘native’, ‘indigenous’ or ‘tribal arts’, which can be seen as colonial and patronising usages.

It might be possible to find or invent other terms than ‘vernacular’ for the visual art that is the subject of this article, for example, ‘colloquial’ art (meaning an informal as opposed to a formal art in terms of training, the institutionalisation and exhibition of such art; this, however, might also appear demeaning in its references to slang); ‘art outside the mainstream’ (but the art under consideration is not the same as ‘outsider art’ and may become part of the mainstream in certain instances); ‘regional’ or ‘national’ art (although the former is too narrow and the latter is also politically incorrect); ‘endemic’ art (as in ‘prevalent in or peculiar to a particular locality or society; … confined to a certain region’ (Berube 1985:452), but with connotations of disease that are not intended here), or ‘idiomatic’ art (relating to a ‘regional speech or dialect’ (Berube 1985:639), but this term is perhaps too closely connected to the linguistic for our purposes). Fine (2004:xiii) equates the term ‘vernacular’ with ‘folk art’, but acknowledges the latter as somewhat outdated and prefers ‘self-taught art’ as a less politicised term (2004:3). However, because the visual forms that we will consider in this article are not entirely or always ‘self-taught’, we will use ‘vernacular’, redefining it below in line with the key sources consulted. A closely related term is ‘crafts’, but it, too, does not mean exactly the same as ‘vernacular’.

By ‘vernacular’ is meant the local or regional, that which is used and associated with a particular people or place (Makins 1995:929). While the term commonly applies to local languages it can be used – and in this article is used – to apply to local visual art forms. We use it in a metaphorical sense as referring to arts that come to be identified with a nation, region or locality, which are not indigenous but are developed or invented, whether consciously and rapidly, or unconsciously and slowly, in response to changing socio-political and socioeconomic circumstances. One might rather use the seemingly contradictory term ‘contemporary vernacular’ to describe the visual arts that are the subject of this article, as this term indicates both the fact that these visual forms are local, regional and come to be associated with specific communities or countries, and
that they are at the same time ‘new’ and are invented or constructed. Fine (2004:25–26) considers these visual arts ‘a matter of everyday genius’ and compares their manifestations in the visual arts with that of a language ‘in use that differs from the official languages of power’. This can be seen, in an art context, to differentiate ‘contemporary vernacular arts’ from ‘contemporary arts’, which are generally far more embedded in academic institutions such as universities, galleries and museums, and can be seen as the mainstream, while ‘vernacular’ arts are more marginalised, in particular from artistic discourses and sites of both production and exhibition, and remain largely outside of the artistic mainstream.\(^1\)

This article aims to examine the development of the ‘contemporary vernacular’ in the visual arts by a theoretical investigation based largely on the work of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), and Bowe (1993). In so doing, it will define the notion of the ‘vernacular’ more exactly. It will then look briefly at the historical examples of the Russian matrioshka doll and Morris & Co. for further clarification, and will apply these notions to an examination of selected examples of contemporary South African crafts. This article aims to briefly describe the socioeconomic and cultural factors that give rise to the development of national, ‘contemporary vernacular’ arts, then to describe their general characteristics and to analyse recent examples of South African crafts, to show that South Africa is following similar developments to other historical examples with regard to such visual forms.

Factors that give rise to the invention of the ‘vernacular’

Many countries have experienced the phenomenon that ‘vernacular’ arts develop in times of upheaval and social change. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) show that this is part of the development of ‘national identities’ which are, like their visual counterparts, invented and constructed, sometimes by small groups of people or even by individuals, generally in response to political imperatives. Examples include nineteenth-century Great Britain, as it felt the full socioeconomic and political effects of the Industrial Revolution, and many countries of Europe that were being unified in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Russia, Hungary, Poland, Norway, Ireland and Finland, as well as Japan and the United States of America. The essays in Bowe (1993) give a thorough account of the creation of national, ‘vernacular’ arts in a number of countries in the early twentieth century, in response to political and ideological aspirations in times of national change, such as independence, unification, or the advent of democracy. Many of these admit a debt to the British example, which grew from the Arts and Crafts Movement which, in turn, was much influenced by the practices and ideals of William Morris. All the countries mentioned above manifest ‘a desire for national cultural identity and political independence [that] inspired a great deal of contemporary design, its education and exposition; architecture and the applied, decorative and graphic arts’ (Bowe 1993:11).

African countries, too, have developed approaches to their visual arts that are ‘vernacular’, and are not necessarily indigenous or traditional, but rather constructed or invented. Such developments in Africa have also occurred in times of socioeconomic and political transformation, such as colonisation and subsequently independence. These are, however, not mentioned in either Bowe or Hobsbawm and Ranger. Examples of such visual arts in Africa might include a number of ‘invented’ sculptural genres, for example Tuareg leather boxes, silver jewellery and saddle-bags, Senofu ‘skeleton’ figures and objects from across the continent such as inlaid masks, figures representing goldweights, ivory bracelets and necklaces, malachite carvings and jewellery, ebony cowrie-covered belts and bracelets, painted mud cloths and objects embroidered with animals and masks (Steiner 1994:33–36). According to Steiner, these visual forms are neither indigenous nor traditional, but are contemporary developments to fulfill the demands of certain markets, such as tourists and Western collectors. They have thus developed in response to changed socioeconomic circumstances.

South Africa, having been through radical social transformation during the socio-political upheavals of the 1980s and the transformations following 1994, is no different from the countries mentioned above. It is one of those ‘countries (that) still face the task of building a national political community. … These efforts may be compared with the
nation-building of Western countries during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ (Bendix 1989:137). ‘Contemporary’ art, which is admittedly a contested term in contemporary discourse, but one which we must use in order to differentiate it from ‘contemporary vernacular’ visual arts, is an unlikely source for the development of any arts that are strongly identified as local, regional or national, based as it is in Western culture on individualism and originality, rather than in communities as an expression of national pride. It is in the ‘vernacular’ arts – specifically in crafts or folk arts – that such developments are more likely to be found.

As mentioned above, the most important factor in the development of ‘vernacular’ arts is socio-political change and the desire by a nation to ‘demonstrate internally that a new era had dawned’ (Watanabe 1993:43). A second impetus for the construction of such an approach to the visual arts is the growth of a middle class, which has historically spent money on the home and its furnishings and decorations. The growing South African middle class can be expected, like that in Victorian Britain, to spend money on purchasing and decorating homes, and therefore on luxury goods such as art and crafts, which is borne out by the growing market for South African art.

Another positive factor in the expanding production and sale of ‘vernacular’ arts in contemporary societies such as South Africa is the association of tourism with crafts. Tourism both within and to South Africa has been increasing for a number of years. Many tourists purchase ‘vernacular’ objects as a memento of their travels. ‘Vernacular’ arts are an important aspect of the growing phenomenon of ‘cultural tourism’, where tourists are as interested in seeing the cultural resources of communities as they are in conventional sights such as wildlife or landscapes, and ‘everything is grist to heritage’s greedy mill’ (Lippard 1999:79). The development of tourist nodes such as the Midlands Meander or the Cape Winelands routes incorporates – or, in the case of the Meander, is largely dependent upon – ‘vernacular’ arts and ‘a road trip highlight is the random sighting of vernacular art works’ (Lippard 1999:113). It has been reported (inter alia in Moodley 2005:22) that, given the growing number of both South African and international tourists in the country, there are insufficient craft producers in some areas to adequately supply this expanding market. Although research has not been done to determine the value of crafts to the South African economy, it is estimated, based on figures from the Western Cape, that crafts retailing in South Africa were worth approximately R2 billion in 2005, and were growing steadily (Kaiser Associates 2005).

Accompanying this growth in tourism is the politically motivated desire in South Africa to develop national, ‘vernacular’ arts. The development of arts and culture is a government priority, as these are seen to play an important role in nation-building, as stated, for example, by Itumeleng Mosala, then Director-General of the Department of Arts and Culture (2005:25). Du Preez (2004:106) argues that ‘our fragmented history denied us the opportunity to create a unique visual language’. South Africa does not have a rich tradition of crafts, because the crafts made by colonists were often inferior copies of European products, while indigenous ethnic crafts, which varied considerably in number, style and even quality from group to group, were disrupted by both colonialism and apartheid, which furthermore led to cultural isolation that exacerbated the neglect of crafts.

Inventing the ‘vernacular’

‘Vernacular’ arts, as discussed by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) in The invention of tradition, like so many other aspects of nationhood, are usually invented and are not necessarily or even generally based on old folk or national traditions. Bowe (1993:7) also points out the synthetic or constructed nature of the ‘vernacular’. As Berman (1993:164) states: ‘vernacular Norwegian architecture was built upon tradition, but nothing from the past was copied.’ Bowe (1993) analyses the link between nation-building and ‘vernacular’ visual arts in countries as diverse as Hungary, Ireland, Finland and the United States. Stylistically, in all the examples in Bowe, these ‘vernacular’ arts are characterised by a search for a ‘vernacular symbolism’ (1993:32) using images appropriate for that country, which may be based on local flora and fauna, geography, climate, landscape or history, personal narratives of ordinary or marginalised people, or a combination of these. These arts, furthermore, may adapt
indigenous national styles and folk or peasant elements, if such exist. Sources can include elements of indigenous arts and history, as well as those introduced by colonial settlers, and may incorporate both actual as well as mythic elements and ‘imagined’ or constructed histories. They may even include foreign elements (Bowe 1993:55, 79, 170). Given these characteristics, it seems appropriate to use the term ‘contemporary vernacular arts’ to differentiate such visual forms from traditional, indigenous or folk art.

These arts all aim at ‘honesty’ by using local materials and/or techniques of production, even if these have lost their original purpose. Bowe (1993:56) notes, for example, that techniques developed to use waste material may later be revived for purely decorative purposes. These ‘contemporary vernacular’ arts, apart from sharing stylistic characteristics and subject matter, usually have socio-political and developmental aims and results. Commonly, such arts are the development of integrated communities of makers, according to Fine (2004:2), while according to Bowe (1993:129) the objects so produced are usually communal, rather than individual, products. However, they may result from a combination of an expression of individual creativity with shared social values and a shared symbolic order (Fuller 1985:232). In either case, they are ‘synthetic’ (Bowe 1993:7) and are constructed, whether by one or two people, or by many.

These objects are often an expression of ideals regarding art and craft. Their originators can, for example, aim to improve and/or modernise existing indigenous and folk art, as well as expand existing markets for them (Bowe 1993:83–86). This improvement is often achieved by using trained designers to redesign products of folk art. The products have a ‘nostalgic, craft-based idealism’ and idealise the rural and indigenous traditions of pre-industrialised, undeveloped regions of a country (Bowe 1993:11, 56, 127). They often arise, in theory, from a perceived need and initially through theoretical writings or discussion, and are then put into practice (Bowe 1993:100). The products are a reaction against the commercialisation of crafts and design, or the loss of a living tradition of crafts, and thus are devoted to handicraftsmanship. They seek to create a tradition and establish its identification with national heritage and national pride.

Furthermore, the production of ‘contemporary vernacular’ arts is often allied directly to social reforms such as job creation and raising the living standards of marginalised groups. They may be made by the ‘uneducated, elderly, black, poor … and rural [dwellers]’ (Fine 2004:4), and so may be characterised by the identity of their makers. It is the stories of these makers that form the basis of the narratives, as well as the appeal of such products. The makers are non-professional, so their products are part of popular, rather than ‘high’ culture and they aim to produce signs and symbols that can unify and regenerate their society (Bowe 1993:143).

While they may be produced by rural or indigenous craftsmen, ‘contemporary vernacular’ arts are aimed at a viewership or market from the broad middle class, the sophisticated urban elite and international buyers, where the products may become part of a souvenir market (Bowe 1993:67, 86, 91, 97). The sense of national pride that may arise from such vernacular arts is a result not so much of their intrinsic national character, but often of national pride in successful contemporary and popular arts (Bowe 1993:169).

A good example of this invention of a ‘vernacular’ art is the Russian *matrioshka* dolls, which were designed, based partly on an existing peasant theme, by a professional artist in 1891, marketed to a sophisticated urban and international audience to create work for rural peasants, eventually mass-produced using industrial practices such as division of labour, and are still made and sold in spite of criticism about their ‘authenticity’ in their present form and at their contemporary level of high quantities of production (Salmond 1993:81–98). The irony is that they never were ‘authentic’, but fit the description developed above of a ‘contemporary vernacular’ product, which came to be associated with rural Russia.

Another example of ‘vernacular’ craft is the products of Morris & Co., the Victorian crafts company of William Morris (Bowe 1993:66). He is used as an example here not because his work or approach had any influence on South African developments, but simply as an historical example that exemplifies one approach to the development of the ‘vernacular’. Many of the strategies mentioned above were used by Morris: he used images from the local countryside and
its flora and fauna; employed local materials and techniques whenever possible; improved English design but combined this with hybrid sources as inspiration for design; and used tradition in innovative ways. Morris can be credited with the construction of a particularly English vernacular, as his design iconography is English: English flowers, oak leaves, river birds, ‘reminiscences of English woods and meadows’ (MacCarthy 1994:406) (1).

Stylistically, too, there is an ‘Englishness’ to Morris’s designs. Pevsner (1936:63) refers to this very ‘Englishness’ of Morris’s designs, rooted as they are in historical models and the countryside of England, while Thompson (1976:728) states that Morris’s genius was peculiarly English in its most characteristic expressions. Fuller (1985:226) refers to the ‘sturdy, practical, downright approach, veneered with, if anything, a touch of hearts of oak Englishness’, which arose from Morris and became an orthodoxy among successive waves of British designers and theorists.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Morris himself established the idea that his products were typically English, thus he helped to invent and construct the very notion of what constituted Englishness in the visual arts. He often expressed as an aim the designing of products that were English in character. Morris was notably successful at forming tastes and shaping markets, both religious and secular, for his range of products (Harvey & Press 1991:2). He understood from the first that the company’s products needed to be exposed and marketed to selected clients, and that their ‘vernacular character’ was one way to do this. On presenting his high-quality Hammersmith carpets to the public, he stated in a brochure that these compared in quality to the best Eastern carpets, while at the same time not being imitative in design, they were the result of the best English ideas (Harvey & Press 1991:138). Morris aimed to make products that used local traditions and materials, as well as local or national history, yet were simultaneously imaginative and innovative. As the company became well known and fashionable, it became a ‘household word’ and then came to symbolise the local or the national. According to Fuller (1985:253–254), England had – at that time – no living tradition of pattern which could be applied to, for example, textile design, as any indigenous design had been destroyed by industrialisation.

Morris’s model for the invention of a ‘vernacular’ tradition in design was inspirational in the twentieth century. For example, Bernard Leach was inspired by Oriental ceramics, but adapted these to English traditions, combined with individual creativity, to remake a tradition of pottery and to create the British studio pottery movement. According to Fuller (1985:241), if a national tradition is lacking in society, one must have the courage to reforge it. Thus William Morris, in the crafts produced by Morris & Co., can be said to have ‘constructed’ an English ‘vernacular’, through a combination of certain historical and folk traditions with new elements of his own invention. These ‘vernacular’ symbols and aesthetic approaches, once constructed, may seem much older than they are and begin to ‘express that elusive concept of nation’ (Hobsbawm 1975:285).

Inventing the South African ‘vernacular’

Examples exist within the field of South African crafts that show the characteristics delineated above, and thus can be seen to exemplify the development of a contemporary, South African ‘vernacular’ art. We will briefly discuss three examples: Ardmore Ceramic Art, Kaross embroideries and the Mapula project.

Ardmore Ceramic Art is an enterprise producing decorative ceramics in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. It has been in existence for over two decades, since 1985. Fée Halsted-Berning, who qualified in fine arts at the Natal Technikon, majoring in painting and ceramics, started Ardmore Ceramic Art on her husband’s farm in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands near Winterton, where Ardmore is still situated. A second studio with a museum has since been opened at Lavendula Farm near Caversham.

According to Halsted-Berning (2007), she began working with Bonnie Ntshalintshali, a daughter of one of the farm workers, producing ceramics together. Ntshalintshali, although illiterate and uneducated in terms of Western schooling, proved to be exceptionally talented and knowledgeable about Zulu customs and practices. Under Halsted-Berning’s training she became a creative and well-known artist. The two women formed a strong, fruitful partnership. Because the work was noticed by buyers and the art world almost immediately and sold well, more local people joined the studio. Individual artists now make their own, individual work that is still identifiable as ‘Ardmore’, and the studio also produces certain studio lines in larger batch productions to cover costs. Ardmore now employs over one hundred people. Its development, in socioeconomic terms, has been largely successful but it has, as an organisation, also experienced difficulties, such as the death of many of its members from Aids-related illnesses and their co-opting by rival studios, such as Kim Sacks in Johannesburg.7
Ardmore has become famous both nationally and internationally, and has achieved the highest prices ever paid for South African ceramics. Thus, some of its production has certainly become part of mainstream South African art. However, the bulk of its products are sold in craft and curio outlets, so it straddles both popular and contemporary art. In general, while there is an Ardmore style, based on simple vessel shapes elaborated with complex modeled additions and highly detailed, brightly painted decorative surfaces, there is a great deal of individuality in the work of different artists, which becomes clear as one becomes more familiar with the work. The essential Ardmore subject is nature, and the work focuses on, but is not restricted to, South African topics and natural themes. The vessels are covered with modeled animals like leopards, lions, cheetahs, panthers, tigers, elephants, zebra, giraffes, fish, birds such as toucans, flamingoes and sunbirds, and many flowers that are indigenous or exotic. These are painted with details that elaborate the forms, while the spaces between are painted with decorations consisting of flowers, foliage and abstract, geometric patterns (2).

The modeling of the animals, birds and plants that encrust the vessel shapes is highly naturalistic, convincing, inventive and complex, and has become increasingly so in recent years, whereas earlier works were, by comparison, simplified and naïve in their naturalism. Halsted-Berning (2007) says that the sculptors, as rural people, have observed animals and birds all their lives and know them tacitly, even if the animals they model are exotic ones that they have never actually seen. They have also modeled with clay all their lives, for example children’s toys such as the ubiquitous clay oxen found in many rural communities, so they are familiar with its plastic possibilities.

The aesthetic appearance of Ardmore may not be particularly South African in that the natural subjects are taken from all over the world, its historical precedents are in European and English ceramics and its technologies are Western. However, Halsted-Berning (2007),
who manages all the marketing, situates this inventive work as typically South African. She states, for example, that the painters bring their ethnic sensibility to decoration, being sensitive to the rhythms, textures and colours of, for example, Zulu beadwork and basketry. The earlier chintzy ‘English’ flowers that covered many surfaces have, in recent works, been replaced by more exotic ones that Halsted-Berning (2007) refers to as the ‘jungle’ look. She sees this as a move towards a more ‘African’ aesthetic in place of a ‘European’ one. Halsted-Berning notes that the ability to observe and model from nature and the rhythms, patterns, repetition and colours of African art and artefacts – particularly Zulu aesthetic sensibilities – form the visual foundations of the work. It is certainly unique and not like anything else being made locally or internationally, and can be seen to be part of the formation of a new or invented South African ‘vernacular’. The project, furthermore, is built upon the ideals, strongly expressed by Halsted-Berning (2007), to contribute to social development through job creation, poverty alleviation and AIDS education and management.

The second example of a South African development of ‘vernacular’ visual arts is Kaross, an embroidery business situated on a farm in Limpopo Province. Kaross is in a rural area near the town of Letsitele in the Giyani District, surrounded by small, scattered rural villages. It has been in existence for more than twenty years. Irma van Rooyen, who has a degree in fine arts from the University of Pretoria and is a practising artist, started the business in 1985 on her husband’s citrus farm. The wives of the farm workers and women from villages in the area had no work and poverty was rife. They were also largely uneducated and illiterate (Van Rooyen 2007). Although there is no historical, indigenous tradition of embroidery in southern Africa (Nettleton 2000:20), the Shangaan women from the area did have some tradition of decorating their houses and clothes, for example the minceka. They also made tray cloths and bedspreads embroidered with flowers in a European style that may have been adapted from Afrikaner traditions of embroidery and quilting. So, embroidery skills existed. In order to help the women earn some money, Van Rooyen offered them cloth and thread, suggesting that they embroider pictures of their lives. The women were initially not able to do this, as they lacked design and drawing skills or even any conception of what Van Rooyen wanted (Van Rooyen 2007). She therefore made drawings of their homes and villages and the surrounding bush and its animals, which they embroidered. As Van Rooyen admits, the initial ‘character’ and appearance of Kaross were hers, revealing her love for all-over pattern and complexity, rather than minimalism or simplicity. However, she took certain design motifs, such as geometric patterns, from indigenous sources such as Venda pottery and Ndebele house painting, and combined these with the embroidering abilities of the women. Much of her initial design style still undoubtedly remains, as the appearance of the smaller animal-and-background cloths has changed little through the existence of the enterprise. News of Kaross spread and sales grew, and the project now employs 1 038 people, mainly Shangaan women. Three local men, Solomon Mohati, Calvin Mahluale and Thomas Khubayi, now assist Van Rooyen by designing and drawing images onto cloths, and these local designers have brought renewed creativity and their ideas to the work.

The bulk of the products of Kaross, produced in large numbers because of demand, are smaller cloths with a single animal in the centre – always an animal associated with Africa, such as a lion or elephant – surrounded by geometric patterns. Recent themes are more narrative and include portraits of people with their surroundings, which are made up of a variety of stitches in brilliant colours. Subjects are very varied and include scenes such as the manula tree, cattle, the traditional healer or sangoma, the nearby Risaba Crossing with its taxis and buses, and events such as weddings. These are what Van Rooyen (2007) calls ‘story-telling’ cloths, which have detailed, varied scenes of a wide range of subjects, such as everyday rural or sometimes urban life, events and ceremonies. They combine figures of people and animals with detailed environments consisting of objects commonly found in the area: animals, flora and fauna, buildings, roads, vehicles. The diverse motifs are unified by the dense, decorative effect of saturated colours and a variety of stitches that usually cover the surface of the backing cloths. These are made into wall hangings, cushion covers, table mats or tray cloths. Other, more complex cloths are usually larger and
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3 Kaross, story-telling cloth, untitled. (Subject: a wedding.) (2007). Backing cloth and thread. Approx. 1000 x 1000 cm. Photograph by Susan Sellschop.

become wall hangings, bedspreads, curtains or upholstery fabric. They have complex scenes of intertwined flowers, foliage, birds and animals, in very rich patterns.10

Typical of the design aesthetic of Kaross is the full, dense, all-over nature of the final surface, as the entire surface of the cloth is embroidered. The effect is of complex and varied patterns, which both make up the objects depicted and fill them and the surrounding spaces. Van Rooyen (2007) describes the style of Kaross as 'South African', and this is a convincing description as the embroideries combine her initial Eurocentric approach with the design inputs of the Tsonga-Shangaan designers and the aesthetic sensibilities of the embroiderers. Thus the approach is a hybrid of sources and it might well, in its hybridity, be termed postmodern.

Mapula is a community project that produces embroidered cloths made into cushion covers, bags and wall hangings. It was started in 1991 by members of Soroptimists International and a group of women who were affiliated to the Department of History of Art and Fine Art at the University of South Africa, and included Professor Karin Skawran, Antoinette du Plessis and Janétje van der Merwe.11 The Soroptimists were already involved in Winterveld, an extremely impoverished urban–rural area forty kilometres from Pretoria, through health, literacy and food-growing projects based at the Sisters of Mercy’s DWT Nthathe Adult Education Centre. It was decided to start an embroidery project because one of the group, Janétje van der Merwe, had prior experience of a similar project, the Chivirika embroidery project in Giyani; because
the technique is relatively easy and familiar; and because little infrastructure or equipment is required. The aim was both to enable the poverty-stricken and unemployed women of Winterveld to earn some money and, in some way, to enrich their lives.

Members of the Soroptimists started with a group of fifteen women at the Sisters of Mercy. The Soroptimists would go out every Saturday to guide and encourage the women in their embroidery, and those Soroptimists who were skilled designers initially helped the women by making drawings which they embroidered and then made into cushion covers and place mats. The women had few embroidery skills and apparently few drawing or design abilities. Later, more of the women began to design and draw their own pictures, and did so with notable success. So, the Mapula style developed slowly. Today Mapula is still located in Winterveld and includes 180 women working in four groups under group leaders. Van der Merwe, who remains the ‘manager’, puts much energy, on a voluntary basis, into promoting, marketing and guiding the products of Mapula.

The Winterveld women were encouraged to depict their own lives and what they saw around them. The volunteers would bring books, photographs and other visual material for the women to use as inspiration for their drawings. The early designs, like the bread-and-butter line of Kaross, comprised a central motif framed with patterned borders. One interesting suggestion that helped to develop a more distinctive approach was to use current news events as subject matter, so cloths have depicted the 1994 national elections, the transition to democracy, events involving Nelson Mandela (such as his inauguration) and other political happenings (4).

Important issues in the lives of the embroiderers, such as the Aids epidemic and its effects on the community, are also depicted, usually on larger cloths. Many include texts written by the women and embroidered to form part of the overall decorative effect of the designs. These messages convey some information about the subject of the cloth. The women have, since those early days, developed their own design aesthetic and individual approaches whilst the work can still be recognised as coming from their particular community.

The drawings developed by the Winterveld women are characterised by stylisation, which is further simplified in the process of embroidery. So, for example, perspective is flattened, sizes of objects are somewhat arbitrary in their relation to each other, and shapes are simplified and exaggerated, which gives the works a naïve charm. Yet the narratives are often complex, with many figures and details of landscapes, events, animals, cars, taxis, streets and shop signs, etc. A combination of simplicity and complexity is one aesthetic characteristic of Mapula’s embroideries. Another aspect of Mapula’s approach is that the designs are rarely purely decorative, as almost all of them depict narrative scenes in that they suggest that action or part of a larger ‘story’ is taking place, or they are pictorial in that they depict figures or animals in an environment. The ‘stories’ told often reflect the harsh realities of poverty, Aids, sickness, death, domestic violence, abuse, etc; and these form a contrast to the decorative aspects of the work. They make strong socio-political and cultural comments, although the aim of the women is not necessarily to create such statements but to tell their own stories and reflect their own lives and experiences.

The approach of Mapula, although hardly so intended by the embroiderers themselves, might be characterised as postmodern in its use of and references to images from the mass media. This kind of ‘quotation’ and recycling of existing images is characteristic of postmodernism. According to Schmahmann (2006:39) women in the project certainly have no exposure to postmodernist theory and they do not set out to parody or self-consciously quote from the mass media images that serve as their sources. Their choice and treatment of subject matter does nevertheless tally with a postmodernist understanding of visual language as a shared discourse rather than the product of individual invention.

In addition, Van der Merwe (2007) sees Mapula as having a particularly South African character that has been enhanced and promoted by the publicity it has received in numerous South African publications, and by its purchase and display in venues associated with South Africa, such as South African embassies and South African Airways’ business lounges in many countries. The design aesthetic has become associated with a developing South African ‘vernacular’ visual art.

To reiterate, the construction of a ‘vernacular’ visual art includes some or all of the following: the design may look back to traditions but is not necessarily traditional or indigenous, and this is not a defining characteristic of the ‘contemporary vernacular’; products use local materials and existing techniques which, in the South African context, include materials such as beads, techniques such as basket-making, and stylistic elements associated with indigenous crafts such as repetitive rhythms, strong colours or geometric patterns; images may, and usually do, make reference to a particular locality, community or group by including images from local fauna, flora, geography, history, narratives, landscape or combinations of such hybrid sources; designs adapt indigenous styles if such exist; the designs are often produced by rural craftspeople; and the products are innovative and imaginative, lacking which they would be mere curios or inauthentic copies of existing traditions. Thus individual creativity in the form of successful and accessible, popular, contemporary arts becomes a source of national pride and constructs the ‘vernacular’. This is Fuller’s ‘courage to reforge a national tradition if one is lacking’ (1985:241).

All of the above examples can be seen as part of a developing South African ‘contemporary vernacular’ visual art. Stylistically, all are complex, colourful, figurative and a hybrid of sources, combining regional and communal traditions with Western approaches, which may manifest in the materials, technologies and images. Their subject matter includes local flora, fauna, narratives, geography and landscapes, and they thus establish a ‘vernacular’ symbolism. They are invented and, rather than being
traditional, are contemporary developments. Their designers and makers, too, fit the defining characteristics of a developing ‘vernacular’, in that the products are the work of professional designers and artists working closely with marginalised communities, or come about in an interaction between professional artists and the community of makers. The projects are generated and sustained by ideals such as poverty alleviation and job creation, as well as artistic ideals valorising handcrafts and the encouragement of self-expression. The products, while not South African in a traditional or indigenous sense, are promoted and marketed as such, thus they have come to be seen as typical of the nation or region. Thus the approach and aesthetic can, taken as a whole, be said to be synthetic and to construct a ‘contemporary vernacular’ visual art.

It is interesting to note that all the South African products are naturalistic, figurative and, in the case of Mapula and Kaross, narrative. This could be attributed to many influences: the postmodern return to figuration; African traditions of figuration and naturalism; the demands of the market; the oral, story-telling traditions of many African peoples, and the association of Africa with nature and its fauna and flora. It is not within the scope of this article to attempt to trace these influences, but it must be noted that all the designs can be said to share some iconographic or symbolic aspects, and all may be termed ‘postmodern’.

The work of all the South African enterprises, while referring to some or other tradition, is contemporary and can be said to symbolise the new, democratic South Africa. All use hybrid sources and can be seen to represent some kind of multi-culturalism. They carry significance which may be intrinsic to the cultures where they arise, but is more likely to be promoted by the publicity strategies of the enterprises and learnt by their viewers and buyers. Thus all the initiatives, while contributing to the construction of the ‘contemporary vernacular’, at the same time use this as an important aspect of their marketing and branding.

Conclusion: Problematising the ‘contemporary vernacular’

It seems to us that there are two philosophical or critical approaches to the ‘contemporary vernacular’, each proceeding from different perspectives. Fundamentally, these two positions might be classified as the 
conservative and the progressive approach.

The conservative approach seems to require and to seek the recuperation and representation of the past as a form of validating tradition and difference. Here, the search for identity and the ability to represent that identity (a process of identification or ‘marking’ of difference and therefore of validation) is steeped in the identification and seeming recuperation of traditions, histories, heritage and the representation of community (imagined or otherwise). In the conservative approach, the ‘vernacular’ is seen as the representation of tradition or the indigenous, as suggested by the recuperation of the past. This might be argued to be, for all intents and purposes, an essentialist argument. Nevertheless, it is often employed in the political strategy of either foregrounding or celebrating ‘otherness’ – the imperatives of defining community.

Alternatively, the progressive approach is built around socioeconomic imperatives. In this dynamic, one might refer to the ‘vernacular’ as the accretion or hybridisation of both tradition and the contemporary, in the search for progressive solutions. Here, the ‘vernacular’ looks both ‘backwards’, to discover, invent or reinvent possible pasts but, at the same time, looks to current (and potential future) socioeconomic conditions. The notion of hybridisation in this sense, therefore, contains elements that are both reactionary and progressive, commercial and aesthetic. Depending on the approach employed, such ‘contemporary vernacular’ products might be viewed as commercialised or commodified art, or as debased versions of traditional indigenous arts. They may be criticised as being inauthentic and not ‘true’ traditional crafts, but there are counter-arguments to these criticisms. This article has aimed to show that the products under discussion are indeed neither traditional nor indigenous, and thus are not ‘authentic’. They are invented and contemporary developments. The idea of commodification, for better or for worse, is not rejected in postmodern approaches to art, and postmodern practice and theory often embrace the popular and accessible.

The notion of ‘authenticity’ is furthermore contested from a postcolonial perspective. Steiner (1994) argues that this is a Western notion imposed on African art, which is seen
by the West as the product of unchanging traditional societies which are not permitted, in a sense, to change or make art for commercial purpose, as it is made in the West itself. This is a kind of ‘othering’ that maintains the superior position of the West and its arts, and is rightly rejected in postcolonial discourse. In fact, the products of the craft enterprises that are the subject of this article are, we would argue, not a debasement of any traditions but are instead, as in many developing countries, contemporary inventions that are hybrids of different sources. They may be seen to reflect the multi-cultural nature of many contemporary societies such as South Africa and can be seen to represent ‘multicultural authenticity, cultural democracy or nationalism’ (Lippard 1999:81).

The potential of the development of superior crafts can assist, as shown in the examples above, in establishing a national, visual identity. An acknowledgement of the sometimes competing dynamics involved in the ‘contemporary vernacular’ opens up ways of describing and understanding this particular manifestation in the visual arts. It also allows us to engage with terms such as ‘the indigenous’, ‘the community’, ‘the market’ and related concepts.12

Notes

1 One might argue that the work from Mapula, Ardmore and Kaross is indeed part of mainstream South African art, by virtue of the fact that exhibitions of selected works have taken place in mainstream galleries and museums, but this is to ignore the fact that much of the production of all three projects, particularly what Van Rooyen (2007) of Kaross calls the ‘bread-and-butter lines’, is sold in craft shops and tourist centres, or is sold directly from the studios or by their managers, without any public exhibition at all.

2 The black South African middle class, for example, grew by between seven and ten per cent from 1990 to 2000 (D’Angelo 2007:3).

3 One example of this growing market is the record price of R4.4 million achieved in 2007 for a South African painting by Pierneef (http://www.businessday.co.za/downloads/ArtSupplementJune2007.pdf).

4 South African households spent R11 billion on holidays in 2005, with most of this being spent by the middle classes and the rich (Reuters 2006:1). In addition, foreign tourists numbered 8.4 million in 2006 – one million more than in 2005 (Khumalo 2007:22).


6 Ingrid Stevens visited Ardmore over two days, 02/07/2007 to 03/07/2007, in order to spend time at each of its studios. She interviewed Halsted-Berning formally, as well as various other Ardmore potters, painters and sculptors informally, and visited a number of shops and exhibitions displaying the work of Ardmore.

7 The organisation and processes of labour, design, production and business at all three of the South African projects are complex. It is not within the scope of this article to deal with these issues. Where they are mentioned, it is merely to relate these projects to the organisations and aims of the examples mentioned in Bowe (1993).

8 Ingrid Stevens visited Kaross on two occasions, formally interviewed Irma van Rooyen on 01/02/2007, informally interviewed the designers and embroiderers, and visited shops that display the work of Kaross, including its shop in Parkview, Johannesburg.

9 A flat, rectangular cloth, often decorated with beads or embroidery, that is wrapped around a woman’s body as clothing (Becker 2000:108).

10 A huge, complex and very ambitious project that has recently been undertaken by Kaross is a 15-metre-long embroidered and appliquéd cloth for the library of the University of Pretoria. This had not been publicly unveiled at the time of writing, and the authors were asked not to give any details about it.

11 Ingrid Stevens visited different Mapula sites on a number of occasions, formally interviewed Janéti van der Merwe on 16/02/2006 and 24/04/2007, informally interviewed a number of the Mapula women, and viewed the work of Mapula on site and in a number of craft shops. The history and work of Mapula have been very well documented by Schmahmann (2006), which is not the case with many South African craft projects.

12 Although not within the scope of this article, it will also allow us to explore notions of exoticism, commodification, exploitation, multiculturalism and the like, in the hybridisation that is inevitably embedded in concepts such as craft, nation-building and tourist art.

References


Van Rooyen, I. 2007. Interview. Limpopo Province. (Transcript in possession of I.E. Stevens.)